



Two mishaps put Vermont Yankee in spotlight

Mishaps hit Vermont Yankee

By [THE ASSOCIATED PRESS](#)

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MONTPELIER, Vt. — Two mishaps within 10 days at the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant have given ammunition to its critics, prompted questions from regulators and have the plant's owners working to reassure the public about its safety.

"You can say it about Vermont Yankee and you can say it about the nuclear industry as a whole nationwide," David O'Brien, commissioner of the Department of Public Service, said yesterday. "If you're going to have nuclear power over any long term, it's all going to come down to maintaining the public's confidence that it can operate safely and reliably."

Robert Williams, spokesman for Vermont Yankee owner Entergy Nuclear, said yesterday the plant was preparing to start up again after a sudden and unplanned shutdown Thursday, but was not expected to do so for a few days.

Plant officials and regulators like O'Brien both say that neither the collapse of a water-cooling tower at the plant Aug. 21 nor a faulty valve that triggered the Thursday shutdown were safety issues.

The plant was operating at 63 percent of its normal power output on Thursday while repairs were under way on the cooling tower when the emergency shutdown unfolded. Vermont gets a third of its power from its lone reactor; when it isn't running at capacity, utilities are forced to buy more expensive power on the New England spot market.

In its formal report on the incident, the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission said a third glitch cropped up during Thursday's shutdown: An automatic system designed to control pressure levels in the reactor failed to kick in as the plant shut down, forcing control room operators to do the work.

The NRC said this happened "for some unknown reason," and that Vermont Yankee "is investigating the event."

Vermont Yankee has been running for 35 years, its current license is set to expire in 2012 and it has asked the NRC and the state for a 20-year extension, to 2032.

"Unfortunately, these two events occurred right together," Williams said. "But they're unrelated, and we'll bring the plant back on line consistent with our conservative operating philosophy."

Raymond Shadis, technical adviser to the nuclear watchdog group New England Coalition, said any problem at a nuclear plant needs to be taken seriously. "This isn't a peanut butter factory," he said. "It's not like the worst thing that can happen is you get smooth instead of crunchy."

Thursday's sudden outage came on the same day that the NRC reacted to the cooling tower collapse by questioning Entergy's assertion — which the NRC previously had agreed with — that most of its 22 cooling towers don't need to be included in the review the plant is getting in advance of relicensing.

NRC spokesman Neil Sheehan said yesterday that the agency planned next week to send an expert on cooling towers to Vermont Yankee to investigate what happened.

Williams said reconstruction of the collapsed cooling tower was expected to be completed in the coming days. He said the cause of the Aug. 21 collapse wasn't yet known, but if the investigation showed design changes were needed, they would be made as a retrofit to the newly rebuilt tower.

David Lochbaum, nuclear engineer with the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, said he was not overly concerned about Thursday's shutdown, because the valve-sticking problem that triggered the shutdown has been a common occurrence at reactors around the country.

As for public confidence, Lochbaum said the public needs to rely on the NRC to enforce safety and plant maintenance standards strictly. But he argued that the agency is "not consistently the cop on the beat that it should be."

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